CHAPTER 13

AFRS BECOMES THE INDUSTRY STANDARD

Even with the makeshift nature of their headquarters, first on the Fox lot and then on Santa Monica Boulevard, Armed Forces Radio operated much like any of the commercial radio networks. Differences did exist, but most favored AFRS.

They undoubtedly had a higher quality staff of writers, producers, directors and entertainers than any network on the private side. As the war progressed, Tom Lewis transferred to his command virtually anyone from the radio field who found himself in the service. AFRS assembled an all-star staff that no network could have afforded -- and not without the threat of combat duty.

Through the Hollywood Victory Committee, the staff could request any performer they needed to fill a slot on any program they produced. Transcribing the shows and then editing them down to the right time, enabled the technical staff to produce programs complete and error-free. In Hollywood, that surely wasn't the norm.

Perhaps the most obvious difference was that AFRS didn't concern itself with profit and loss. The shows it produced filled its audience needs and interests, but they weren't necessarily dependent on popularity in the way commercial radio broadcasts were. The staff had more freedom to be creative.

Lewis did have to secure money to run his operation, but he did so from the government itself, not from advertisers. In the early days, he had problems obtaining money and men from the War Department. He was building a new organization from scratch and the officers with whom he was dealing didn't share his appreciation for the value of radio.

Needing funds to get his organization going, Lewis sent Al Scalpone to Washington. Scalpone was originally from Young and Rubicam in New York and was one of the first people to accept an invitation to join the AFRS staff. He'd not yet received his promised commission and Lewis thought that if he went to the Pentagon as a civilian, he wouldn't have to worry about rank. Before answering Lewis' call to come to Los Angeles, Scalpone had served as a consultant to the Joint Army and Navy Welfare Committee - the organization Osborn had headed before accepting his instant generalship and assignment. Scalpone knew who to approach once he arrived in Washington.

He prepared a typical advertising presentation, which included a request for twice the men and money needed. The Colonel who controlled the funds raised the question that Lewis and his staff would face on all his trips to Washington. He asked whether Scalpone knew there was a war going on and told him that the last place he was going to allot money was for a radio operation that he thought was a rather childish thing.

Scalpone lied, telling the Colonel that he was a consultant to the Secretary of War, and that he might just go on down the hall to talk with Stimson. Reacting to the bluff, the Colonel suggested that Scalpone "not be so hasty." He agreed to give AFRS half the money it was requesting - exactly the amount of money Scalpone had in mind. Never mess with a pro.

Scalpone accomplished another feat on his trip East. Stopping in New York, he went to several of the companies who sponsored radio shows and secured programs for AFRS use. When he returned to Los Angeles, Lewis decided that he might be more valueable as a civilian because of the freedom he'd have in dealing with the military.(1)

The military had little understanding of what production of radio shows required. Bob Lee later noted, "Somehow, the military didn't realize that what we had to do was create these programs." Radio needed such creation. While stations had begun to spring up spontaneously, none had enough programs to sustain their operation for any length of time.(2)

The stations that began to appear were "far more than accidents," said Lewis. "The men needed them. They were answering their own need in the field. That helped me more than anything in talking to Congressional Budget Committees. I realized that almost every Congressman and Senator had someone in the Army, some son or daughter. At least he had constituents who were in the military." As a result, Lewis would carefully describe to budget hearings how the men in the field answered their own needs. "They built stations built out of bailing wire and chewing gum," he'd say, in greatly dramatizing the budget requirements.(3) It always worked.

Yet, according to Lee, Lewis was "in a very hot spot between the chaos of creativity that takes place in the building of programs, and the rigid climate of the military." Most of the Army leadership thought of winning the war only in terms of battles. They had a difficult time appreciating the value of radio. Lewis coped with this conflict "very uncomfortably." In going to Washington, he had to plead his case on the intangible grounds that radio would boost the morale of the troops.

Lewis had "to ask people to do things they didn't want to do, or didn't think they wanted to do, or didn't think

they had to do." In Washington, the people he dealt with seemed to think in terms of troops. As long as Lewis had the manpower, AFRS needed nothing else. At the very least, Lewis needed complete cooperation from the War Production Board to obtain the vinylite for the transcriptions.

Lewis, the leader, considered himself a representative of the men in his command and worked to free them "to do their creative work."

The purpose of this effort was to bring service to the civilians in uniform. Lewis noted, "unlike our allies or our enemies, the people we were servicing could now or would one day take part in electing their own Commander-in-Chief. The accent was on the welfare of the enlisted men, always."(4)

To exist, Lewis had to learn his way around Washington quickly. He had to be able to pinpoint the people who could help him. This included Governor McNutt, who was head of the War Manpower Commission. He also had to meet with congressional budget committees. Despite his work in advertising, Lewis found that it was difficult for him because he'd not been in such high echelons of government before. Once he learned his way around, the AFRS Chief found he could handle the government bureaucracy and obtain the funding and manpower he needed.

PUTTING WASHINGTON'S FUNDS TO WORK

AFRS provided programming for more and more stations around the world. By May, 1944, AFRS was producing 106 shows totalling forty-two hours of broadcasting weekly. Sixty of the programs came from commercial radio, taken off the air and decommercialized.

The AFRS Program section functioned first under the direction of Major Mann Holiner, formerly the radio director on the West Coast for Benton & Bowles ad agency. Another ad agency exec followed him. Austin Peterson, who had worked with Lewis at Young & Rubicam, created the balance of the programs. In peacetime, an ad agency might be content to turn out one or two half-hour programs a week, but AFRS maintained its extraordinary schedule of producing many programs week in and week out.

"Mail Call," AFRS's first original program, went on the air in August, 1942. "Command Performance," however, became the keystone of AFRS programming after Lewis took over its production from the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations in December, 1942. AFRS created these and the other shows from scratch. They conceived, wrote, produced and recorded them just like any commercial radio show. The difference, of course, was that AFRS didn't have to pay for the writers, producers or directors who were in the Service. More important, they didn't pay for any of the talent.

According to the May 16, 1944, issue of *Daily Variety*, it would've cost close to $10,000,000 a year for commercial radio to have put the same entertainers on the air. For example, on the Christmas, 1943, 90-minute "Command Performance" special, the list of stars included: Bob Hope, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Nelson Eddy, Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore, Ginny Simms, Frances Langford, Kay Kyser and his band and Spike Jones and the City Slickers. In addition, Major Meredith Wilson conducted the AFRS orchestra, composed of leading musicians whom Wilson had brought together for all the live programs.

A more typical, half-hour "Command Performance" offered Hope, Judy Garland, Lana Turner, Durante and Betty Hutton. Although some stars like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore and Jack Benny seemed to appear on one or another of the AFRS shows at least once a week, the Program Section took care to avoid imposing on the Hollywood stars too often. Three leading talent agents, now in uniform, Lester Linsk, George Rosenberg and Barron Polin, had the task of making the necessary arrangements. According to Sylvester "Pat" Weaver, who later became president of NBC and who arrived at AFRS in 1944, these men "were the nerve center of getting the people, depending on what the idea for the show was."(5)

The former agents served as liaison between AFRS and the Hollywood Victory Committee, which acted as the clearing house to provide stars for all wartime activities. Typically, one of the AFRS writers would come up with a skit that called for the performance of a couple of entertainers. He'd ask the talent procurement unit to request the stars from the Victory Committee. If the stars were available, the skit would be fitted into the show on which the writer was working. On the day of the program's transcription, all the entertainers would show up at the studio, rehearse and then record the show before a live audience.

Given the quality and availability of the talent and the skills of the writers, producers and technical people, the original programs which AFRS produced more than matched the level of creativity and appeal found in commercial radio during the war. Weaver as President of NBC considered this period "the zenith of radio" because of the way radio declined once television arrived after the war. The AFRS programs may well stand as the highest expression of American radio.(6)

Weaver replaced Bob Welsh as producer of "Command Performance" in early 1945. He observed, "we did 'Command Performance' radio shows that were better than any other radio shows, anywhere, no matter how popular." The program built its reputation on its weekly

half-hour variety format that presented leading entertainers and artists whom the troops in the field had requested. A writer would build an individual show around an idea and the one or two entertainers he chose to feature. When the staff knew that an East Coast celebrity, such as Fred Allen who lived in New York, was coming to Los Angeles, they'd make an effort to create a show around the star.(7)

One typical show had its origins in an appearance of Frank Sinatra in one of his many "Command Performance" scheduled broadcasts. According to Weaver, the writers began to develop ideas around the highly publicized "feud" between Sinatra and Bing Crosby. Like other public relations gimmicks, the press had created the impression that Sinatra and Crosby didn't like each other. Sinatra, the newcomer, was going after the audience of the old, established crooner. To foster this image on the air, Sinatra would make old-man jokes about Crosby who in turn would make "skinny-wind-will-blow-him-away" jokes about the reed-thin younger singer.

For this particular program, the staff brought in Crosby's four young boys to serve as Sinatra's foil. As Weaver recalls, the singer asked the boys what their father was doing. They said he was out in the garden planting. Sinatra asked what he was planting. The answer was the same as last year, "Your phonograph records!" Describing the response, Weaver said, "Now, when an eight-year-old boy says that, you know, the whole place just absolutely collapsed!"(8)

"THE GREATEST RADIO SHOW IN HISTORY"

While such programs remained the traditional fare, the "Command Performance" specials required considerable planning and preparation. They stand out as radio's finest hour. AFRS produced the 1944 Christmas broadcast in mid-October. Bob Hope acted as master of ceremonies for the two-hour program. The roster of stars included Judy Garland, Dorothy Lamour, Danny Kaye, Spencer Tracy, Frances Langford, Dinah Shore, Jack Benny, Ginny Simms, Fred Allen and Jimmy Durante. Besides the AFRS orchestra, which Meredith Wilson conducted, the program also featured the bands of Spike Jones, Xavier Cugat and Kay Kyser. Secretary of War Stimson, Secretary of the Navy Forrestal and Chief of Staff Marshall provided brief "Seasons Greetings" messages. Bob Welch produced and directed the package and distributed it for broadcast on more than 440 outlets. *Radio Daily* estimated that if commercial radio had produced the program, the talent alone would have cost more than $150,000.(9)

The *Los Angeles Daily News* called the program "the greatest radio show in history." At the time, it was. In terms of sheer number of stars, no program might ever have matched it.

AFRS did manage to top it on February 15, 1945, when it created the famous "Dick Tracy Wedding Special." Weaver modestly considers it "one of the greatest shows ever done in radio." As with most "Command Performance" programs, the Dick Tracy Show began with requests from soldiers in the field asking AFRS to transfer Dick Tracy from the comic strip to the airwaves. The program evolved into a two-part special featuring Bing Crosby as "Dick Tracy," Bob Hope as "Flat Top," Frank Sinatra as "Shaky," Dinah Shore as "Tess Trueheart," Frank Morgan as "Vitamin Flintheart," Judy Garland as "Snowflake," Jimmy Durante as "The Mole," the Andrew Sisters as "the Somers Sisters," and Jerry Colonnas as the Chief of Police. What a cast!

Bob Welch produced and helped script the show with several of the AFRS staff writers. Word of the show produced a run on the box office at the KNX studios which had transcribed it. Since most tickets went to men and women in uniform, few people outside the military had the opportunity to see and hear the program. The special was never broadcast in the United States. It would have cost at least $50,000 in 1945 dollars for the talent alone, if a commercial network had tried to produce it. The show managed to do what Tracy's creator, Chester Gould, didn't do for another four years in his comic strip. His detective hero married his long-time girlfriend after a wedding day interrupted by a bank robbery, a kidnaping and a holdup which killed thirteen people — very typical of the comic strip. Thank goodness they didn't write the honeymoon!

The Christmas Specials, the Dick Tracy Wedding "Command Performance," and the V-E and V-J Day Specials enhanced the AFRS reputation while they entertained the troops.

G.I. JILL

The regularly scheduled programs, both original and decommercialized programming, remained at the heart of the broadcast operation. "Command Performance," "Mail Call," "Jubilee" and the other programs satisfied a wide variety of tastes. However, it was a quarter-hour daily show, "AEF Jukebox" that had perhaps the largest impact on the soldiers' morale. Strictly speaking, the program operated as a music request show playing the popular records of the day. The disc jockey made the difference.

Martha Wilkerson, known to the soldiers as "GI Jill," combined music with conversation in a way that reminded the troops of their girls back home. Jill was, herself, a young mother with a G I. husband.

If the letters to Jill provide any indication, the simple

format worked. One Sergeant wrote from the Pacific Theater: "Your cheerful voice does wonders to our morale. Tokyo Rose is also on the air. It's as if two women of enemy countries were battling for men's minds. I'm glad you're winning, Jill." Because her show played at different times of the day, Jill signed off: "Till next jive-time, this is your G.I. gal Jill saying good morning to some of you - good afternoon to some more of you - and to the rest you...good night" in a wistful tone. In turn, one G.I. wrote: "I'm one of the fellows to whom you say 'good night.' Please, won't you shift your supercharger onto the 'good afternoon' just once?"

Martha Wilkerson started her radio career working in a Los Angeles station, doing all sorts of administrative jobs. She was broadcasting overseas for the OWI when Lewis heard her and brought her to AFRS in 1943. She was just 24, America's answer to Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose. Given free rein, Wilkerson worked up her own scripts and developed her audience, playing records, telling jokes, encouraging requests and answering her mail. Routinely, it all required 18-hour days.(10)

Producing and transcribing Jill's and all the other programs were only the first steps in the process of delivering the news, information and entertainment to the troops. Lewis and his staff had decided earlier to send the programs on transcriptions to the individual stations for broadcast. AFRS began to develop and expand its short-wave section with the OWI operation. By September 1, 1943, AFRS was shortwaving one hundred and two hours of programming a week. In September, OWI agreed to give AFRS an allocation of time blocks on the more important broadcast beams. That gave AFRS the opportunity for more programs with an orderly schedule.

WORLD-WIDE BROADCASTING

To run the short-wave section, Lewis brought in J. Carter Hermann, who'd been working in OWI as Assistant Chief of its Bureau of Communication Facilities. Besides the headquarters facilities, AFRS had offices and studios in New York and San Francisco that did the actual broadcasting of the programs overseas. From the east coast, the England/Mediterranean beam reached England, North Africa, Italy, Sicily, the Mediterranean, and after D-Day, the continent. The New York facility also provided programming to Central Africa and Greenland. From San Francisco, programs went to Alaska, China, the Southwest Pacific, South Pacific, South and Central America, the Caribbean, and the Antilles.

Although AFRS delivered its programming on disks, the short-wave operation broadcast six hours of its own entertainment productions and decommercialized shows. Short-wave provided news every hour on the hour, special features on international events, general interest items and small town happenings. AFRS considered the latter programming to be highly important for morale. They broadcast the fifteen-minute program "Hometown Highlights" every day on all beams. They relayed major events either live or re-created by recordings. The men in the field probably listened to the sports programs with most interest.

Besides the play-by-play broadcasts, the short-wave section had special-interest shows. These included "Sports Mail Bag," which answered questions sent in from the men in the field. On one occasion, the program received a letter from New Guinea asking "Sports Mail Bag" to settle a bet. Had Benny Leonard fought Lew Tendler once or twice, the reader asked. A few days later, Leonard himself answered in person on the air!

AFRS paid particular attention to the news, trying to present it as accurately and free from bias as the newscasts aired on commercial radio. The Army News Service gathered the news from the press wire services, wrote the scripts and turned them over to the two short-wave offices for broadcast by enlisted men. The use of a soldier as the announcer gave the men in the field more confidence in what they heard than if a civilian read the copy. Armed forces broadcasting still operates under the same time-proven philosophy.

Perhaps at no time during the war was this confidence needed more than when AFRS announced the death of President Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. AFRS received word that Roosevelt had died at 4:49 EST. AFRS put the bulletin on the air at 5:52 EST when England, Europe and the Mediterranean began receiving shortwave programs. Until 7:00 EST on April 15, AFRS operations proceeded on a restricted schedule with the entertainment programs cancelled. Every short-wave program had a direct relationship either in factual content or in type, to the gravity of the hour. The AFRS office maintained the closes possible liaison with the major network newsrooms and special events departments for the entire period of restricted schedules. Even after the end of limited broadcasts, AFRS continued to monitor the programs of the major networks so that it could keep the troops informed of developments.

During the restricted period, AFRS increased most of the five-minute newscasts to fifteen-minutes. The news carried mostly information about the President's death, amplification of the details of the story, news of the movement of the President's casket and news of the funeral and burial services. In addition, the newscasts provided a wealth of material on the new President, Harry S. Truman.

AFRS aired the first program about President Truman at 7:30 AM EST on April 13. As with all the informational broadcasts, this one drew heavily on material that the

commercial networks had already presented to their domestic audiences. Other programs included the reaction of Hyde Park to Roosevelt's death and reports of the burial from several eyewitnesses. AFRS also broadcast several memorial tributes to the late President. From New York, Bill Stern brought many of the leading figures in sports to the air with their recollections of Roosevelt.

During the funeral services at the White House on April 15, AFRS observed a five-minute period of silence. Raymond Massey followed, reading the address President Roosevelt had planned to give that evening. An announcer described the funeral rites. After the burial at Hyde Park on the 16th, AFRS carried a special Hollywood tribute to the President condensed from a two-hour program one of the commercial networks had aired.

In covering the three days of mourning and ceremony, AFRS fulfilled all the expectations which General Marshall had expressed when he created the radio service.

AFRS had gone well beyond its original conception as a purely Army organization.

THE NAVY JOINS AFRS

On October 14, 1944, General Osborn sent a Memorandum to the Chief of Naval Personnel. The Navy had "indicated a desire to participate more fully in the operating and fiscal responsibilities of Armed Forces Radio." His memorandum advised that the War and Navy Departments had authorized full Navy participation in the service.

Osborn further explained that the Army and Navy had reached an agreement on a general cooperation in a conference on September 25, 1944. The meeting established specific policy bases.

Command authority for the combined operation was to remain vested in the Army with the Navy having representatives on the AFRS headquarters' staffs, boards and policy-formulating commitees. The Navy was to provide "professionally qualified personnel (Navy, Coast Guard or Marine Corps) in sufficient numbers to sustain its responsibility in the combined operations." The War Department would periodically submit a statement detailing actual expenditures made to carry on the Navy's share of the service. Both the Army and Navy "demands for transcriptions and other technical facilities and services [would] receive fair and equitabe attention," according to Osborn. Each service would have their allocation of the resources "continually reviewed and readjusted on the present operational basis."(12)

Lewis completed the formal agreement at a meeting in Los Angeles. It merely authenticated a working arrangement that had been going on for more than a year. By June, 1944, the Navy was operating two radio stations that used the AFRS programming. An Ensign in the Los Angeles headquarters acted as the Navy's liaison. Besides the land-based stations, AFRS was supplying a weekly transcription package and the entire music library to submarines and service ships.(13)

THE 1,000,000TH DISC

To supply the increasing number of stations and ships, AFRS pressed its one-millionth disc for shipment overseas in March, 1945. Lewis received the symbolic 16-inch plastic disc in a brief ceremony on the 12th. On the disc was the newest issue of "G.I. Journal" whose cast included Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Linda Darnell, Betty Grable and Abbott and Costello.

All battle and supply areas overseas received each of the half-hour discs flown to them. It was a logistics feat equal to any carried out during the war. The weekly packages transferred from station to station on planned circuits. The packages included suggested program schedules and script suggestions for the locally-produced programs. In a speech to the Advertising Club in Los Angeles commemorating the 25th anniversary of radio on February 6, 1945, AFRS Commander Lewis explained radio's task this way: The Air Force had one target - the enemy. In contrast, radio had three targets - Americans at home, friends and enemies in foreign lands and the American troops all over the world. AFRS was a big job.

Lewis said, " 'Victory through Air Power' has come to mean not just wings of steel over Berlin and Tokyo -- but wings of words over the World! Before radio, the pen might have been mightier than the sword, but, radio has made the spoken word a weapon of war. It is far more than rhetoric to say that words are a sniper's bullet! A rocket shell from a landing boat! Words are long range artillery! Words are 'bombs away!' Words are ideas and this is a war of ideas! The free mind of Democracy is at war with the slave mind of Totalitarianism!"

Lewis told his audience that AFRS was playing its part by reaching the troops in the field "as a superhighway bringing the sound and memory of America to its sons and daughters - providing forgetfulness to the wounded - relaxation to those tense from the fatigue of battle - filling the void of home-sickness and the emptiness of boredom - providing up-to-the-minute news for the anxious - education for the ambitious - orientation on the meaning of this war for all!"

While these were the foals of Lewis and his staff, to most of the men in the field, AFRS undoubtedly was just "a little bit of home."

Lewis conveyed all this in a letter he read to the audience. In it, a Chief Steward aboard a Merchant Marine ship off the Normandy beaches described the impact radio had on him:

"It's not a pretty sight to see American ships blown up by a floating mine or a direct hit from one of the shore guns. Believe me, this was really a test of nerves. Can you imagine how we felt when we came into the mess room for a cup of coffee and to sit down for half an hour? The radio was on and there was a broadcast from the American Forces Network, of 'Command Performance.' It was good to hear the other crew members laugh at the jokes of the radio stars and hum the same tunes that the vocalist was singing. For just a moment, the grim business of carrying out the war seemed so remote. I imagined that I was at home safely listening to my bedroom radio. Listening to their radio here in the ship's mess room seemed to give a lift to all the crew.

"...And when they called us on deck to abandon ship -- the radio was still playing."

NOTES - CHAPTER 13

(1) Symposium discussion; Interview with Al Scalpone, September 16, 1982.
(2) Symposium.
(3) Ibid.
(4) Symposium, July 13, 1983.
(5) Interview with Sylvester Weaver, June 21, 1983.
(6) Ibid.
(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.
(9) *Radio Daily*, December 2, 1944.
(10) Jane and Woodrow Wirsing, "Here's Hill!" *This Week Magazine*, April 22, 1945.
(11) Ibid.
(12) Ibid.
(13) *Daily Variety*, June 2, 1944.